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ABSTRACT

At their summit meeting in February, 1990, the President of the United States and the National Governors' Association established the national education goal that "all children will start school ready to learn" by the year 2000. The process of reaching this goal will require a twofold strategy. First, families will need help in their efforts to prepare their children for success at school. Second, schools will need help in responding effectively to the wide range of developmental levels, backgrounds, experiences, and needs which children present. Families who are preparing students for school will need to take into consideration children's social and intellect readiness. School can be ready for children by using an appropriate curriculum, appropriate staffing, and, in the absence of reliable readiness tests, flexible programming that takes into account individual differences among students at the time of school entry. Such programming can include mixed-age grouping and cooperative learning. (RH)

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Readiness: Children and Schools

Lilian G. Katz

Concern for the readiness of America's children to profit from school experience was expressed by the President of the United States and the National Governors' Association at their summit meeting in February 1990. The first of six educational goals outlined at the meeting was that "all children will start school ready to learn" by the year 2000. Three objectives emerged from discussion of ways to achieve this goal. Communities and schools must:

- provide disadvantaged and disabled children with access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs designed to help prepare them for school.
- recognize that parents are children's first teachers and encourage them to spend time daily to help their preschool children learn; provide parents with training and support.
- enhance prenatal health systems to reduce the number of low birthweight babies; ensure that children receive the nutrition and health care they need to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies.

The Concept of Readiness

Consideration of the readiness goal and the more precise objectives raises questions about the concept of readiness and its meaning to policymakers and educators. This concept has been debated for more than a century (Kagan, 1990). The main issue debated is the extent to which development and learning are determined by the biological processes involved in growth versus the experiences children have with parents, peers, and their environments. Those who emphasize internal developmental processes believe that the passage of time during which growth occurs renders the child more or less able to benefit from formal instruction. Those who emphasize experience take the position that virtually all human beings are born with a powerful built-in disposition to learn and that inherent growth processes and experience both contribute to children's learning.

The quantity and rate of learning in the first few years of life are nothing short of spectacular. The fact that by three or four years of age, most children can understand and use the language of those around them is just one example of learning that takes place long before children begin school.

However, what children learn, how they learn, and how much they learn depends on many factors. Among the most important factors are the child's physical well-being, and his emotional and cognitive relationships with those who care for him. The school readiness goal reflects two concerns about the education of young children. The first is that increasing numbers of young children live in poverty, in single-parent households, have limited proficiency in English, are affected by the drug abuse of their parents, have poor nutrition, and receive inadequate health care.

The second area of concern involves such matters as the high rates of retention in kindergarten and the primary grades, delayed school entry in some districts, segregated transition classes in others, and the increasing use of standardized tests to determine children's readiness to enter school. Standardized tests used to deny children entrance to school or place them in special classes are inappropriate for children younger than six. These trends are due largely to the fact that an academic curriculum and direct instruction teaching practices that are appropriate for the upper grades have gradually been moved down into the kindergarten and first grade.

These two areas of concern suggest that reaching the school readiness goal will require a twofold strategy: one part focused on supporting families in their efforts to help their children get ready for school, and the second on helping the schools to be responsive to the wide range of developmental levels, backgrounds, experiences, and needs children bring to school with them.

Getting Children Ready for School

The term *readiness* is commonly used to mean *readiness to learn to read.* However, children's general social development and intellectual backgrounds should also be taken into account in any consideration of ways to help children prepare for school.

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- *Social readiness.* Children are more likely to cope successfully with their first school experience if they have had positive experience in being in a group away from their home and familiar adults. Young children can approach new relationships with confidence if they have already had some positive experience in accepting authority from adults outside of their family. They are also more likely to adjust easily to school life if they have experienced satisfying interaction with a group of peers and have thereby acquired such social skills as taking turns, making compromises, and approaching unfamiliar children. Parents and preschool teachers can contribute to social readiness by offering children positive experiences in group settings outside of the home, and by helping children strengthen their social skills and understanding (Katz & McClellan).

- *Intellectual readiness.* Children are more likely to feel competent in school if they can understand and use the language of the peers and the adults they meet in school. They are also more likely to have confidence in their own ability to cope with school if they can relate to the ideas and topics introduced by the teacher and other children in class discussion and activities.

  Parents and preschool teachers can strengthen intellectual preparedness by providing children ample opportunity for conversation, discussion, and cooperative work and play with peers who are likely to start school with them. Parents of children not enrolled in a preschool program can help by talking to the staff at the child's future school about the kinds of stories, songs, and special activities and field trips usually offered at the school, and by introducing related topics to their children.

Getting the School Ready for the Children

The most important strategy for addressing the school readiness goal is to prepare the school to be responsive to the wide range of experiences, backgrounds and needs of the children who are starting school.

- *Appropriate curriculum.* A position statement on school readiness issued by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990) points out that, given the nature of children's development, "the curriculum in the early grades must provide meaningful contexts for children's learning rather than focusing primarily on isolated skill acquisitions" (p.22). The curriculum should emphasize informal work and play, a wide range of activities related to the children's direct, firsthand experience, ample opportunity to apply skills being learned in meaningful contexts, and a wide variety of teaching methods.

- *Appropriate staffing.* Teachers are more likely to be able to accommodate the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, languages, and interests of their pupils if their classes are small, or if they have the services of a qualified full-time aide. Having two adults in each class makes it easier to staff classes with speakers of more than one language. Small child/staff ratios provide teachers with the opportunity to spend unhurried time with every child, to address each child's unique needs, and to develop good relationships with parents.

- *Age considerations.* The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Position Statement on School Readiness points out that contrary to what is commonly assumed, there are no tests by which to determine reliably whether a child is "ready" to begin school. "Therefore, the only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the legal chronological age of school entry" (p.22). Some schools and districts are experimenting with mixed-age grouping as a way of reducing grade retention rates, and encouraging children to help each other in all areas of learning (Katz, and others, 1990).

Realizing the goal of having all our children ready for school and all our schools ready for the children by the year 2000 will require the best efforts of all involved: parents, teachers, administrators and everyone in the community who has a stake in the welfare of its children. And that's just about everybody!

For More Information

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